Protest and the Japanese Political System

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There is little question that protest is an important element in the contemporary Japanese political process. Since the end of World War II, a variety of demonstrations, riots, strikes, petition drives and the like have been observed. An outstanding example of this type of activity is the Anti-Security Treaty Movement of 1960. The process of updating the 1951 US-Japanese Mutual Security Treaty triggered a massive national upheaval in Japan. Though the revised treaty was eventually ratified and enforced, it is well known that the crisis led to the cancellation of President Eisenhower's trip to Japan and to the resignation of Prime Minister Kishi.

The present essay reviews protest activities — especially the 1960 Anti-Treaty Movement — in postwar Japan as an example of the processes and stress in Japan's political modernization, and then attempts to shed some light on the following basic questions on protest: (1) what is the attitude of the Japanese general public toward protest behaviour? (2) what is the function of this type of activity in the contemporary Japanese political system? (3) will the magnitude of protest behaviour in Japan increase or decrease in the immediate future?

I. Japanese attitude towards protest

With regards to the Japanese attitude towards protest one could generate two hypotheses: one is that the Japanese must approve of this type of political activity in view of frequent and numerous protest activities in Japan; the other is that participants in protest tend to be very favourable toward protest activity, but spectators will be negative toward it. Since a very large majority of the Japanese people have never participated in protest, the latter hypothesis assumes that the Japanese public as a whole tend to be unfavourable toward protest behaviour.

Available data are consistent with the latter hypothesis. According to a public opinion survey on the Anti-Treaty Movement conducted in July 1960 (Mainichi, August 13, 1960), one finds a ratio of 5 to 1 in favour of negative attitudes toward the demonstrations that took place during the crisis and a
ratio of 8 to 1 supporting negative attitudes toward the political strikes. Evidently this type of public reaction seems to persist even in later years. According to a survey conducted by Ward and Kubota (Kubota 1972: 22–23), there exists a ratio of 12 to 1 between those saying that an event like this should not be repeated and those who said that it might be repeated. Data on public reaction to the May Day Riot of 1952 are even more dramatic. According to a survey conducted in July 1952 (Mainichi, August 1, 1952), one finds a ratio of 26 to 1 in favour of negative attitudes toward the May Day Riot and related incidents.

The ratios of negative and positive attitudes to most survey questions tend to be balanced (e.g., 1 to 1, 2 to 1, or 3 to 1, etc.). It is certainly unusual, therefore, that one finds such skewed ratios as 5 to 1, 8 to 1, and 26 to 1 as revealed in the afore-mentioned data. They suggest that there exists a strong sense of abhorrence among the Japanese toward protest behaviour. Indeed the popular response to this type of activity seems almost emotional, and it appears that the Japanese public judge protest as a highly illegitimate, immoral and intolerable form of political behaviour. In any event, then, the first hypothesis is rejected that assumes that the Japanese public must be favourably disposed toward protest behaviour just because some Japanese frequently and regularly resort to this type of activity.

II. Function of Protest Activity in the Japanese Political System

Why is it, then, that some Japanese organize and carry out protest activities, in spite of their being an overwhelmingly unpopular method, in order to promote a political cause? Do protest activities in fact succeed in accomplishing the objectives they purport to seek? If not, do they make any significant contribution toward the fulfillment of these objectives? It seems that most protest movements aim at accomplishing one or more of the following broad objectives: (1) to influence the masses and elites of the society and to compel the government to make a decision in favour of the movement, (2) to influence the masses and elites of the society without necessarily influencing the decision of the government, and (3) to influence the masses of the society without necessarily influencing the elites of the society and the decision of the government.

Insofar as the 1960 Anti-Treaty Movement is concerned, it is obvious that the first of the above three objectives was not attained, for the treaty was indeed ratified by the Diet and has been in force since then. It seems, however, that the two remaining objectives were accomplished.

By any standard the level of mass social and political upheaval which the Anti-Treaty Movement was able to generate was extraordinary and unprecedented. During this crisis, wave after wave of demonstrations took place throughout Japan; numerous petition drives were executed; since major political strikes were carried out, Japan’s communication and transportation systems were seriously disrupted; a variety of mass political activities took place in